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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 SANTO DOMINGO 004403

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR WHA/CAR AND WHA; WHA/PPC FOR ERIC FALLS; DRL FOR
ARLEN WILSON

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ELAB](#) [DR](#)

SUBJECT: DOMINICAN DOCTORS STRIKE FOR SALARY INCREASE;
OTHER SECTORS STANDING BY

1. SUMMARY. Public sector physicians and the GODR have clashed on wages and hospital conditions, leading to several strikes and protests and a continuing reduction of medical services, especially for the poor. Doctors demand better salaries and better conditions in the hospitals, while the Dominican government counters that the present state of the economy precludes an expenditure of that size. END SUMMARY.

DOCTORS TAKE TO THE STREETS

2. The Dominican Medical Association (CMD) represents the more than 18,000 doctors and health workers at public sector hospitals. The CMD, led by its president, Dr. Waldo Ariel Suero, has adopted aggressive tactics toward the GODR with respect to salary and other issues. Salaries for doctors in the public sector currently average between US\$300 and \$400 per month, a figure that continues to fall due to high inflation. In real terms in pesos, doctors make less than half of what they were earning just five years ago. Ariel Suero is demanding an immediate 40 percent pay raise followed by an additional 35 percent raise in 2005.

3. Hospitals are also seriously affected by the energy crisis, which has led to frequent blackouts, and by inadequate budgets funded with delays if at all. There is also a shortage of medical equipment, and some patients have complained that they have had to purchase their own basic supplies in order to receive treatment. The CMD demands that the GODR work to improve the conditions in the hospitals. The CMD would have the government pay for these improvements by earmarking taxes on alcohol, cigarettes and weapons licensing. In that way, the CMD says, the cost of public health will fall on those who can better afford it.

4. The CMD has undertaken several highly publicized work stoppages, during which certain hospitals treat only the most critical cases. The CMD has also arranged several protests and marches in a successful attempt to garner press coverage and public support. The CMD has technically been on strike since last December, and it has scheduled work stoppages of varying length and scope during that time. In April, when President Mejia received a CMD delegation, Ariel Suero agreed to suspend strikes until after the May 16 election, apparently on the understanding that Mejia would take some action after that date. However, when Mejia received the CMD again in mid-July, he was explicit that there was no money in the budget for salary increases.

5. The physicians' work stoppages, combined with the power blackouts and the high cost of electricity and medical supplies, have partially paralyzed the public health sector. The press has run a series of exposes, articles, and photographs about hospital conditions. The hospitals that remain open for emergencies report crowded conditions. In one maternity hospital in Santo Domingo, two or three expecting women have to share the same bed. Many elective surgeries have been postponed indefinitely. Mejia visited a Santo Domingo hospital on July 26 with Health Secretary Jose Rodrigues Soldevilla in an effort to counteract these impressions. He took the press along as his "jury" as he visited a dialysis unit and the laboratories, which appeared to be functioning normally. "The medicines are here somewhere, because we paid a mountain of pesos for them," declared Mejia. "These stories are their way of pressing me to increase their salaries before the new government gets here. It would be immoral of me to do so - the physicians have no right to be treated differently from other professionals."

MORE WORK STOPPAGES IN THE FUTURE?

6. The crisis in the medical community will not be resolved until well after the new administration takes office on August 16. Last week, an encounter between Soldevilla and Ariel Suero at a hospital nearly degenerated into fisticuffs. There is no longer any dialogue between the two sides.

7. The PLD party of president-elect Leonel Fernandez has been much more conciliatory towards the CMD, calling for dialogue and consensus and an end to disruptions of medical services. Fernandez's word carries some weight, as the last pay raise for doctors was in 1999, during his first administration

(1996-2000). Even so, the 1999 pay raise was achieved after a series of smaller the CMD strikes, and because of this previous success it is unlikely that the CMD will abandon this tactic when Fernandez takes office. Rather, the CMD told poloff it will continue periodic work stoppages in order to maintain momentum and encourage Fernandez to address the issue quickly. Ariel Suero informed poloff that the CMD is willing to give Fernandez until next February to commit to a salary increase before taking more drastic action.

18. In public the CMD has said that it is considering a nationwide walkout, which would leave responsibility of public health to the approximately 2,400 military doctors, who would be quickly overwhelmed. This is probably just a negotiating ploy, and there is no indication that the CMD would actually take such a drastic step.

OTHER SECTORS WAIT QUIETLY... FOR NOW

19. While the CMD is making news, other labor organizations that have also demanded salary increases are impatiently though quietly awaiting the arrival of the new administration. Fernandez has said that an increase in the minimum wage will not be feasible until the economy stabilizes; unless inflation is controlled, he has told labor leaders publicly, a wage hike will be meaningless. Trade unions differ and would like to see an immediate increase. However, the unions recognize that little can be achieved in the last days of the Mejia administration and they are willing to give Fernandez time to implement his strategy.

110. Labor organizations' respect for Fernandez is bolstered by the presence of vice president-elect, Rafael Alburquerque, a former minister of labor who is well liked in labor circles. Last week, Maribel Batista Matos, lawyer for the National Council of Unions (CNUS), told poloff that there was "hope" that salaries would improve under the Fernandez administration. Nonetheless, if Fernandez does not move promptly to placate the unions, which may be difficult with a Congress that is heavily balanced towards the opposition, it is likely that the labor strife in the public hospitals will spread to other sectors of society by the end of the year.

111. Drafted by Jay Raman.
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